

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 22, 2024

The Honorable Brenda Mallory  
Chair  
Council on Environmental Quality  
730 Jackson Place, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Chair Mallory:

The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) is continuing to seek information from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regarding the Biden administration's 30 x 30 Initiative, which the administration has sought to rebrand as the "America the Beautiful Challenge Fund" (Challenge). Committee Republicans previously sought information from CEQ on this matter during the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress (Initial Committee Letter).<sup>1</sup> But, much to the Committee's disappointment and dismay, CEQ did not fulfill its obligation to the American public by providing the requested information to Congress. In light of recent developments, notably the announcement of an additional \$120,000,000 in grants in February of 2024,<sup>2</sup> the Committee is now revisiting the Biden administration's 30 x 30 Initiative, the Challenge, and all corresponding grant policies and disbursements. The requested information will help the Committee promote responsible conservation while combating waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement.

As you are aware, on April 11, 2022, CEQ announced the "\$1 billion America the Beautiful Challenge,"<sup>3</sup> purportedly aimed at leveraging federal dollars with unspecified non-federal contributions to advance the 30 x 30 Initiative.<sup>4</sup> The 30 x 30 Initiative is an ill-considered and

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rep. Bruce Westerman, Chairman, H. Comm. on Natural Resources, et al., to Brenda Mallory, Chair, Council on Environmental Quality (May 12, 2022), [https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2022-05-12\\_westerman\\_et\\_al\\_to\\_mallory\\_re\\_america\\_the\\_beautiful\\_challenge.pdf](https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2022-05-12_westerman_et_al_to_mallory_re_america_the_beautiful_challenge.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Biden-Harris Administration Announces Up to \$119 Million Available for Locally Led Conservation Projects through the 2024 America the Beautiful Challenge*, DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR (Feb. 26, 2024), <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/biden-harris-administration-announces-119-million-available-locally-led-conservation>.

<sup>3</sup> *Biden-Harris Administration Launches \$1 Billion America the Beautiful Challenge to Support and Accelerate Locally Led Conservation and Restoration Projects*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Apr. 11, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2022/04/11/biden-harris-administration-launches-1-billion-america-the-beautiful-challenge-to-support-and-accelerate-locally-led-conservation-and-restoration-projects/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR, *America the Beautiful*, <https://www.doi.gov/priorities/america-the-beautiful> (last visited Feb. 29, 2024) (declaring that "President Biden has issued a call to action that we work together to conserve, connect, and restore 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030").

deliberately vague attempt to preserve 30 percent of America’s lands and waters by 2030.<sup>5</sup> Despite the administration’s efforts to reinvent the 30 x 30 Initiative, CEQ has repeatedly failed to clearly define the metrics used to satisfy the 30 percent goal. Therefore, the Committee seeks to understand the parameters CEQ will use to monitor the implementation of the Challenge and the 30 x 30 Initiative as a result.

Since its debut, the 30 x 30 Initiative has sparked significant opposition and concern. A diverse coalition of public lands and waters interests—including hunting and fishing groups, local governments, private landowners, small business owners, farmers and ranchers, and many others who rely on the established, multiple-use principles that apply to most public lands and waters—have raised important questions and concerns about the 30 x 30 Initiative. To begin with, the Biden administration has not identified the baseline of current conservation practices from which it would measure any progress of the 30 x 30 Initiative. The federal government, for instance, already owns roughly 28 percent of the total land in the United States.<sup>6</sup> If this amount were used as a baseline, the federal bureaucracy would still have to acquire an additional 41 million acres of land to meet a 30 percent goal. Similarly, 26 percent of U.S. waters are already designated as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs),<sup>7</sup> and 32 percent of the country’s oceans are already in a natural state.<sup>8</sup> Also, the feasibility of managing additional lands under the 30 x 30 Initiative’s auspices remains doubtful, as federal land management agencies have already racked up a \$35.53 billion deferred maintenance backlog.<sup>9</sup> Together, these facts reveal that the 30 x 30 Initiative only serves as a cover as the Biden administration attempts to justify massive increases in federal land holdings and restrictive land management policies that limit access to public lands.

On April 11, 2022, CEQ provided a briefing to congressional staff regarding the operations of the Challenge and the 30 x 30 Initiative. Unfortunately, this briefing left many questions unanswered, with CEQ staff simply indicating that agencies within the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, and Defense would provide an initial commitment of more than \$440 million in federal resources over the next five years to a new public-private grant program to be administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF).<sup>10</sup> Further, CEQ vaguely cited

---

<sup>5</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, *supra* note 3; *see also* Exec. Order No. 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, 86 F.R. 7619 (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/01/2021-02177/tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad>.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Hardy Vincent & Laura A. Hanson, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., R42346, *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data* (Feb. 21, 2020),

<https://www.crs.gov/Reports/R42346?source=search&guid=a92c611da3524498ba3d644d211d60ce&index=5>.

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Wenzel et al., *Marine Protected Areas 2020: Building Effective Conservation Networks*, NATIONAL MARINE PROTECTED AREAS CENTER (2020),

<https://nmsmarineprotectedareas.blob.core.windows.net/marineprotectedareas-prod/media/docs/2020-mpa-building-effective-conservation-networks.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Yachnin, *Could Biden use private land to reach 30x30 goals?*, E&E NEWS (Feb. 17, 2021),

<https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063725297>.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Hardy Vincent, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., R43997, *Deferred Maintenance of Federal Land Management Agencies: FY 2013-FY 2022 Estimates and Issues* (Aug. 8, 2023),

[https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43997#:~:text=From%20the%20start%20of%20the,%E2%80%94%249.82%20billion%20\(87%25\)](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43997#:~:text=From%20the%20start%20of%20the,%E2%80%94%249.82%20billion%20(87%25)).

<sup>10</sup> Briefing from CEQ Leg. Affairs to H. Comm. on Natural Resources Staff (Apr. 11, 2022, 15:00 EDT)

authority under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law<sup>11</sup> as justification for agencies supplying the funding.<sup>12</sup> CEQ stated a goal of dispersing at least \$1 billion in grants<sup>13</sup> despite the fact that there is no mention of “conserving 30 percent of the nation’s lands and waters” or the 30 x 30 Initiative within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Concerningly, CEQ indicated the Department of Commerce and the Environmental Protection Agency would provide additional, unquantified funding at a later date.

Despite repeated requests for information, including the Initial Committee Letter, numerous questions regarding the Challenge and 30 x 30 Initiative remained unanswered. For example, CEQ failed to provide the statutory authorizations CEQ relied upon to facilitate the initial \$440 million expenditure, the sources of federal funds that will support the 30 x 30 Initiative, and a detail of how the funds will be expended. Additionally, CEQ failed to provide the criteria upon which NFWF would rely to disburse grant money. Despite Republican staff requests for copies of the operating procedures that the federal agencies and NFWF would employ in this process,<sup>14</sup> CEQ failed to provide any additional information. Likewise, and as previously stated, CEQ never fulfilled its obligation to the American public by providing the information requested in the Initial Committee Letter.

Therefore, to assist with the Committee’s oversight activities—including to help the Committee promote responsible conservation and combat waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement—please produce the requested materials and information listed below as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. April 8, 2024

1. All documents and communications, including but not limited to agreements, memoranda of understanding, emails, and internal communications of which CEQ is aware, between any agencies and NFWF referring or relating to the establishment and operation of the Challenge from January 20, 2021, to the present.
2. All documents and communications, including but not limited to, reprogramming requests made to the House or Senate Committees on Appropriations, referring or relating to the reallocation of discretionary money to the Challenge or a document sufficient to confirm and describe why no reprogramming requests were submitted to either or both of the Committees.
3. A document sufficient to describe the source of funding for the Challenge, including but not limited to:
  - a. The amount contributed by each agency;
  - b. Future obligations committed by each agency to the Challenge;
  - c. The accounts from which each funding is sourced; and

---

<sup>11</sup> Public Law 117-58.

<sup>12</sup> Briefing, *supra* note 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Email from H. Comm. on Natural Resources Republican Staff to CEQ Cong. Affairs Staff (Apr. 11, 2022, 16:31 EDT) (on file with Comm.).

- d. The legal authorities provided in statute to utilize the funds in support of the Challenge.
4. A document sufficient to describe any additional money the administration has obligated to the Challenge to reach its stated \$1 billion total, including the source of such funds and whether any taxpayer resources have been or will be committed to the Challenge beyond the initial \$440 million.
5. A document sufficient to describe the operating principles of the Challenge.
6. A document sufficient to describe under what legal justifications agencies may transfer funds to NFWF to establish the Challenge.
7. A document sufficient to describe any limitations on how the funds may be expended, including but not limited to:
  - a. Whether funds can be used to fund projects that acquire new land;
  - b. Whether funds can be provided to cover costs of litigants suing the federal government;
  - c. Whether non-governmental organizations under active investigation by Congress are eligible for funding;
  - d. Whether non-governmental organizations with a history of human rights abuses are eligible for funding;
  - e. Whether non-governmental organizations that accept funds from hostile foreign nations are eligible for funding; and
  - f. Whether any funds can be used to shut off or reduce public access to federal lands, particularly for recreational, hunting, fishing, and shooting opportunities.
8. A document sufficient to describe how the administration plans to provide public transparency for the operations of the Challenge, including, but not limited to, disclosure of:
  - a. Recipients of funds;
  - b. The purpose for which funds were provided; and
  - c. Amount of funds distributed.
9. A document sufficient to explain the administration's protocols to monitor waste, fraud, and abuse of funding provided under the Challenge.
10. A document sufficient to describe the criteria by which applications will be reviewed by NFWF.
11. A document sufficient to describe what percentage and estimated distribution of funding will be available to state, local, and Tribal governments and non-governmental organizations.

12. A document sufficient to describe why the administration made funds available prior to the completion of the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas.
13. A document sufficient to describe how the administration is defining the following terms and baseline metrics to determine whether proposed projects are “consistent with the 30 x 30 Initiative”:
  - a. Conservation;
  - b. Restoration;
  - c. 30 percent of lands and waters;
  - d. Equitable access; and
  - e. Underserved communities.
14. A document sufficient to describe whether any funding provided through the 30 x 30 Initiative was used to establish the American Climate Corps and the statutory authorities the administration used to establish such a Corps.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the requests from the Committee on Natural Resources. Please contact the Majority staff for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee at (202) 225-2761 or [HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov](mailto:HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov) with any questions. We look forward to your cooperation.

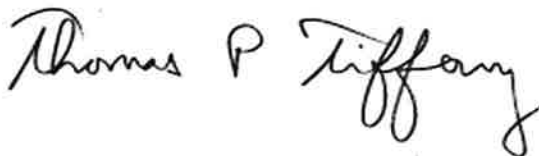
Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman  
Chairman  
Committee on Natural Resources



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Tom Tiffany  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Enclosure